

TRANSCRIPT

Promoting Success in the First Year of High School

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LORI VAN HOUTEN

Hello and welcome. We're excited to bring you *Promoting Success in the First Year of High School*, one in a set of video presentations sponsored by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd and the Dropout Prevention Alliance for Utah Students with Disabilities.

My name is Lori Van Houten, and I'm part of a team of researchers and technical assistance providers dedicated to improving education outcomes for students at risk of dropping out of school.

Today you'll learn that a successful first year of high school is key to earning a diploma four years later. You will also learn what research says about 9th grade challenges and about promising dropout prevention strategies to get students to and through their critical first year.

As you listen to the presentation, consider some of the challenges your school or district may face as 8th graders transition to high school.

Ninth grade is an especially important year in a student's school experience. Whether it means entering a new high school or staying in a familiar school with earlier grades, 9th grade marks the beginning of the conventional four years of high school...and with this transition come new expectations, challenges, and opportunities that have far-reaching educational consequences.

We know from research that students who navigate this transition successfully are far more likely to graduate on time. We also know from research that students who don't manage this transition well often fall behind in course credits and fall off track to graduate on time or drop out.

While the highest rates of 9th grade failure are in urban and high-poverty schools and for racial and ethnic minority students and students with disabilities, 9th grade students everywhere need support for a successful transition into high school.

Some of the challenges entering 9th graders face include: a larger and more complex school organized by subject matter departments, less personal attention, more rigorous academics, and a complicated social environment.

For some students, these become hurdles. To get them back on track to graduate, schools are using a number of promising practices.

Today we'll focus on three of them: using data to identify students at risk of dropping out, providing academic supports to students who need help, and connecting students to caring adults.

But first, let's meet a 9th grader named Danny, who's like many students we know...

Narrator: *Danny is having a rough time as well. He's doing poorly in all his classes. He knows he needs help, but he's so far behind it feels hopeless. Even if he does pass all his classes, he won't have enough credits to graduate, so why try?*

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A key promising school practice for students like Danny is using data to identify which students are at an elevated risk for dropping out based on their history of struggling in middle school, falling behind in credits in 9th grade, or demonstrating "red flag" behaviors such as missing a lot of class time.

To identify these students, schools can use longitudinal early warning indicator data that detect when students have poor attendance, behavior, and course outcomes. These so-called ABC indicators are highly predictive of high school outcomes.

Research clearly shows that for students who are chronically absent, who miss instruction due to behavior consequences such as office referrals or suspensions, or who fail one or more core academic courses, there's a very good chance that—like Danny—they aren't likely to finish high school.

First, let's hear a high school leader describe the way her school uses middle school data to transition students into 9th grade.

Narrator: *We had a ninth-grade problem, and we needed to look at middle school so that we could inform our instructional decisions. One of the things that we really review are student grades at the eighth-grade level. We review the number of referrals that they have received, the number of absences that they have had, the types of courses that they were in so that we can then inform what kind of support services we need to give them when they come over to the high school. For students that are receiving special services at the eighth-grade level, we actually send representatives from our high school to attend what we call transition meetings with them so that we can learn more about the student at the middle school level and then bring that knowledge in a database over to the high school. The "aha" moment for us is let's not wait for students to fail at the ninth-grade level; let's use the expertise at the middle school level to help inform where students should start so that those support services are in place from day one.*

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Now let's hear from a leading researcher about why using data is the starting point for dropout prevention.

Elaine Allensworth: *A data system that follows students' records as they move through high school is essential for measuring dropout rates. If you can't follow students from the time they start in high school to the time they leave high school, you will not accurately estimate the dropout problem in your school. Longitudinal data systems that follow students as they move from year to year to year is especially critical for understanding the nature of the dropout problem because dropout is a process that occurs over a number of years.*

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Finally, let's listen to a teacher explain how indicator data also guide which interventions students should receive.

Lawler: *We meet every morning for professional learning time to collaborate on different things amongst teachers as a staff. But on Thursday mornings, we actually meet to actually discuss student interventions.*

Intervention meeting, unknown speaker: *If you look at the background on Student One, whom we reviewed last time...*

Lawler: *Our students are high risk, and one of the things we have learned is they need more interventions than the average student that would go to another high school. So, we meet on Thursday mornings to discuss any concerns or issues that we have with the students, and we bring those to the table, and we see how we're going to meet them. Currently, we are using a tiered intervention process.*

Intervention meeting, unknown speaker: *So, he is currently seeing a counselor. For our plan, I would assume that we would want that to continue?*

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Another promising school practice for struggling 9th graders uses early warning data or other student-level data to provide targeted academic supports so that they don't fall so far behind in course credits that they give up on graduation.

Slide 3: *How can targeted academic supports help students like Danny stay engaged and prevent them from dropping out?*

Slide 4: Academic supports have been shown to help students in danger of dropping out of school become more engaged and invested in their education. They can provide opportunities for targeted academic help and credit recovery.

Slide 5: Targeted academic supports can be implemented in two ways: intensive in-school or out-of-school programs and homework assistance/tutoring programs.

Slide 6: In planning what kinds of academic supports and help are needed, school or district leaders can think about key decisions that they will need to make: What skills will the help focus on? Can the help be scheduled during the school day or after school? Who will provide the help? In what format will the help be provided?

Slide 7: Academic supports can focus on a variety of areas, but they often provide students additional help in very specific skills or subject areas within reading, writing, or math. Whether a refresher elective, a test-taking skill program, or a small group tutoring session, these programs can help students reach proficiency in particular areas.

Slide 8: Programs can take place after school hours, on Saturdays, and over the summer.

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Our third practice is nurturing relationships in schools. For students especially vulnerable to dropping out, having a caring adult who knows their personal circumstances, monitors what happens to them at school and provides advice and support, and advocates on their behalf is key for getting them back on track to graduation.

Next we'll see how one school organized their 9th grade to promote caring and connection between teachers and students.

Narrator: *Teaming is a structure that we use in the Freshman Academy. We have all of our students and teachers divided into four teams. So each team has an English teacher, a science teacher, a math teacher, a social studies teacher. It also has two Pathways to Success teachers. It has a counselor and an administrator. We look at every student individually when we put them on a team, and so that's 700 students we look at as incoming freshmen. So in April and May, we sit down and we project onto a board the students, what kind of classes they are going to be taking—for example, a pre-AP student will be in some pre-AP classes—and then we take all of that into consideration, and we place them on team 1, 2, 3, or 4.*

Pathways to Success is a program specifically to the Freshman Academy. We call it PTS. PTS is a mandatory elective.

The Pathways to Success teachers serve as a liaison between student and the core teachers to be sure that the student is fully aware of what grades they are making, what assignments they are missing, what assessments they need to make up. I think

that that communication is really the key difference that makes our students successful because the students know that their teachers care about what their grades look like, that the teachers care about what their attendance looks like, and there is a sense of commitment to the student so that the student is persuaded to continue with their educational process.

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Other schools focus on building one-to-one personal relationships. These two examples show how high schools can connect adults with students in ways that demonstrate caring, trust, high academic and behavior expectations, and support for staying in school.

First, let's hear from a researcher:

Russell W. Rumberger: *What the research has found is that successful programs with dropouts will find people to play this role of advocate, and essentially the role of the advocate is to serve as a go-between the student and the school, but also between the parents and the school. So, they are kind of a middle person that have the best interests of the child at heart, the interests of the parents at heart, and they advocate on behalf of those parents and the child in matters related to the school. And it could be related to course work, a particular teacher, getting along with peers, whatever the issue may be. And in fact, in some programs, the advocate would really serve in any way that benefits the child. So, in other words, it could be something unrelated to school in any direct way. They could be having problems with relationships; they're adolescents and they're having a problem with their girlfriend or boyfriend or some family member or whatever it would be. One of the frequent things that we find—or anyone finds if they've talked to students who are having difficulties in school, who are at risk of dropping out, is that they'll say, "There's nobody at school that cares about me. There's nobody at school that even paid attention that I wasn't coming." And so, the whole premise behind having an advocate is having someone who cares deeply and personally about the welfare of that child.*

But to establish a good relationship with a child really requires having this trust, and the foundation of that trust in our experience was really this premise of accepting kids the way they are. And ultimately, of course, you want to improve their performance and maybe even make recommendations about how they can improve their behavior. So, I am not saying that they shouldn't change things that are problematic with them, for example, their social behavior with other peers. But underneath it all is this idea that they are being accepted for who they are.

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Next, let's listen to what some school staff members have to say:

Teacher 1: *We choose to focus our mentoring program on ninth graders because we know that the transition from middle school to high school is absolutely critical.*

Teacher 2: *If we can get students through the first year, that's a huge step, but it's not the end of the road. And so the power of establishing such a strong relationship in that first year is that those kids are now, there is cord, there is a connection to someone in the school. So no matter what happens through the next three years, it's kind of like a safety net to be able to go back to that mentor and say here's what's going on, here is what's up, I need this, or can we talk about this.*

There are so many different ways to build trust, but the most important way, and different mentors and mentees have many variations of doing this, is to demonstrate clearly that there is care and that there is a genuine interest, that this is not something we are doing because we have to; this is something we want to do because we really care about you as a student and, more importantly, as a person.

Teacher 1: *Part of the power of this program, I think, lies in its informality—that there isn't a set schedule. It hasn't become another thing that teachers have to write reports on and have endless oceans of paperwork on. It's human interaction, and that, to me, is the magic of this and the power of it and the way that you get 90% of the faculty to participate.*

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Students themselves tell us in no uncertain terms that positive relationships with adults matter.

Student 1: *When I first started the ninth grade, I felt like I didn't really have to do anything that much, because it was just the ninth grade. So I kind of started slacking off and then my grades went down. And then my mentor, he would always come to me, he was like, "Why you are making this grade? You can do better than that." And I didn't like him because I feel like he was just always bothering me always, always bugging me. I was like, "Why is he being mean to me?" And then once he started telling me that I can do better and I improved my grades, I realized it was because he cared, and he knew I can do better and I knew, but he told me that I have to know that I can do good myself before I can do it. And that helps me a lot.*

Student 2: *If I could give advice to a mentor or somebody that wants to be a mentor, I would say the student has to have trust with that mentor. Compassion is another good thing. Also being stern with that person, you know, you can't always just be lenient, "Oh, it's okay." Some students or kids need that.*

Student 3: *Well, any advice I can give to any person that wants to be a mentor is being a good role model for that person you want to mentor, being there for that person when they need you and treating them like your own kid, being there for them*

when they need you, help them bring their grades up, and if they have any problems, trying to help them resolve those problems they have.

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Graduating from high school is an essential step for adult success.

Research clearly shows that life prospects for young adults without a diploma can be bleak...

...leading to unemployment, poverty, chronic health problems, and incarceration. These outcomes add urgency to better transition students into 9th grade, to help them succeed during their first year in high school, and to keep them on track until they walk across the stage.

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Thank you for joining us! Please share this information with colleagues. We hope that your school benefits from learning more about promising dropout prevention strategies to get students to and through the critical first year of high school.

We'd like to leave you with a few things to think about:

- How are students at risk of dropping out in 9th grade identified in your setting?
- How might one or more of these practices work—or work better—at your school or district?
- What conditions need to be in place for your school or district to consider using these dropout prevention practices?
- What other information or support is needed to use these practices?

If you'd like to access the full version of the videos or other material from this presentation, please go to the Dropout Prevention section of the Doing What Works Library at

<http://dwwlibrary.wested.org>

There are many more dropout prevention practices, videos, templates, and tools for you to view and use.

We've also compiled several other additional resources that you might find helpful along with the transcript of this video. These are available under the Research and Tools tab at

<http://relwest.wested.org>

Again, thanks for participating in this presentation brought to you by REL West. We'd appreciate it if you would complete the online survey at

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HSTransitionVideoSurvey>

Your feedback really matters and is used for planning future events and videos.

Lastly, for support in Utah, please contact Kenwyn Derby at kderby@wested.org or [801.992.3061](tel:801.992.3061).

Anyone may contact REL West for more information at relwest@wested.org